

OCT 13 1948

# Chap Book

*Published by the*  
COLLEGE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION  
BROOKLYN COLLEGE

As a Supplement to THE CEA CRITIC  
VOL. X, No. 6, SEPTEMBER, 1948

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## Poetry and General Education

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**T**HE relatively new term, General Education, under which the curriculum of studies is being revised, has acquired in its common application a specialized and restricted meaning. By explicit definition it is the education necessary for all and to each to the limit of his ability to take and use. But by application to college and school plans it has been qualified by a narrow definition of the humanities and a popular idea about the purpose of learning. The humanities are said to be the study of the art, literature, and general philosophy of past ages; colleges are said to exist in order to solve the known social problems of the present. In effect the humanities are treated as the study of societies: how this one emerged from some other and compares with a third. The humanities are equated with cultural history, not far different from the history of cultures or of men in groups; and cultural history is said to be the core of the core of General Education.

The idea of a general education necessary to all and to be made available to each to the limit of his ability to take and use is excellent. The current restriction of the idea outlined above and operative in the powerful movements of college and school planning is something less than excellent. In effect it neglects the centre of all human concern, the individual, abets the tendency of systematic learning to

stress images and blind itself to objects, and omits altogether the best and characteristic way to think about man.

The purpose of college is something more than the solution of current social problems, of the humanities, than the transmission of past ages, and the core of general education is not cultural history. The first task of the higher learning is to lead men to ask the right questions, on the assumption that most of the right questions are not being asked and that many have never yet been asked; of the humanities, to inquire into man in action, both inner and outer action; and the core of general education is both a subject and a way to treat it. The subject is man and the way is the best way to think about man.

Oddly enough, the best way to think about man, the humane way, has never been firmly named. I shall call it by a clumsy term whose meaning I shall describe though not define. The best way to think about man is poetic; at the core of general education stands poetic thinking.

How effectively to put it there in the middle of the twentieth century will require more home work, far more effort, and especially more concentrated humane thinking than has yet gone into the voluminous reports of general education. Education appropriate to other centuries succeeded in this far better than we do today, and it would be salutary to remark what the real virtue of the old-fashioned literary education was. The new literary education offers suggestions, also, toward a solution of the problem. I predict that it will approach solution not so much by argument as by experience, since the weak conception of the humanities which underlies the inadequate notion of general education arises from lack of experience rather than failure of dialectic.

"General education," says the President's Commission on Higher Education, "undertakes to re-define liberal education in terms of life's problems as men face them, to give it human orientation and social direction, to invest it with content that is directly relevant to the demands of contemporary society." To see the nature of this re-definition of college some analysis of the term general education will be necessary. The term gained prominence to describe the General College of the University of Minnesota where were put the underclassmen who by law had a right to be enrolled but who in fact had no impressive interest in any of the colleges of the university. To these young people lectures are given, and at the end of two years many of them leave with a certificate testifying that they have received general education. In the famous report of the Harvard Committee on *General Education in a Free Society*, the term means something very different. The Harvard Committee held that some knowledge and skill is peculiarly human and thus belongs to all men; some by native aptitude can take and use much of this, others, little; to each it should be available to the limit of his ability to take and use. This the

Committee calls general education. It is good for schoolboys, fox-hunting squires and higher mathematicians. The one general education is good for the dull, indolent or uninterested; the other, for everybody, and notably for the most able. But in applying the idea of general education to all American youth, reasons supporting these two views of general education have become mixed, and theories of what is good for the dull, indolent, uninterested or otherwise ill-equipped have been proposed as if necessary for all. The President's Commission is peculiarly subject to this confusion.

As I have said, the applications of the idea of general education now influential and operative are less than excellent. They involve two other good ideas gone sour, one concerning the nature of the humanities, and the other, the purpose of the university.

The effective idea of the humanities in the United States is succinctly stated by President Conant, who says that they are the "study of the art, literature and general philosophy of previous ages." Humanists, in this view, are transmitters. A committee appointed by the American Council of Learned Societies stated in a volume entitled *Liberal Education Re-examined*, "The two most significant ways of relating things to one another are the temporal and the systematic," and for this reason it placed history and philosophy at the top as the best of the ways of knowing. "A man may be said to be cultured . . ." said the committee, "in proportion to his ability to interpret all the facts at his disposal, all his valued experiences, all his more particular interpretations and beliefs, in an historical, philosophical and global perspective." These notions conform to the opinion recently expressed that at the centre of general education lies cultural history; and they are axiomatic in the report of the President's Commission on Higher Education. Such ideas, indeed, prevail among large groups of twentieth century scholars.

Accepting from many professors of the humanities their own creed, modern university and college presidents have coupled with it the pressing sense of the trials and worries of the day and have come to the conclusion that what and how to teach should be determined by relevance to contemporary society. President Eliot said over half a century ago that the university exists for power and service, and his doctrine is now more universally accepted than any single theory of light or the atom. More and more the university exists to solve the problems (meaning the social problems) of the present. Last autumn I heard a new college president say: Our only and entire problem is survival.

So Algo Henderson, formerly president of Antioch College, says that the attention of the college should be "focussed on contemporary society." The college "searches the past for wisdom that will help solve the problems of the present and will aid in planning for the future." "Education must take its direction from an over-all hypothesis

concerning what constitutes the best society." President Conant applies the same general view to English teaching when he says, "The significance of the dramas, novels, and poems of the English-speaking people of the last three hundred years for the vast majority of our young people lies in their ability to help us understand the origins of our present civilization."

Both educators consider the alleged tastes and prejudices of the young, and in doing so they are consistent with the practical spirit of all of their books and essays on education. President Conant said in his Sachs lectures: "All concerned with the future of the humanities in the schools might well proclaim the fact that since we are living in a technical and scientific age, some attempt must be made to relate the present of this bewildering scene to the much more simple past. To the academically slow-minded youth who wants to do something practical, the appeal of the printed word must be an appeal to a story of simple origins, in order to illuminate an amazing picture. Curiosity, I believe, is more widely distributed than innate love of literature. It is to curiosity that I should turn to bring out in the vast majority of our pupils the willingness to immerse themselves in our cultural heritage . . . By appealing to the curiosity of *all* youth about the origins of an obviously complex and unintelligible technological society, we may evoke a willingness to learn about the past." And Dr. Henderson, in *Vitalizing Liberal Education*: "to improve society for all men . . . Whether or not this is the ultimate purpose of life for all time, it is the one which stands the best chance of capturing the imagination of young people today."

The statements quoted voice the prevailing opinion why we keep school and why in undertaking the new collaborative courses in general education the majorities of the committees think as they do about the course in Western Civilization or the Humanities. President Conant put the matter forcefully to the college and university presidents meeting in Boston when he said that cultural history is the core of the core of general education.

To regard the rim of the argument before the hub, my experience does not lead me to think that curiosity is more widespread than something which makes possible a love of literature. I should agree, it is true, that in evangelical terms there is probably no good thing more alluring in the thoughts of most of the excellent young than the immediate improvement of society, but one well might ask whether our purpose as teachers is evangelical in this sense and whether to the extent that the teacher is a preacher, he should be beguiled into a doctrine because it is easy to preach effectively. I fail to see *how* one can teach, except according to his idea, however hazy, halting and tentative, of the ultimate purpose of life.

To inquire whether curiosity is more widely distributed than

innate love of literature, one should go pretty far beyond the classroom and batteries of tests. Curiosity, I suppose, begins small. It must grow considerably before it becomes an innate love of science, but that is just what it grows into, and it is magnificent. You have seen it in the mere crib, recognizing it by the baby's response to something—toes, red, or a whistle—noticed for the first time and worth investigation. The love of literature begins small, and it, too, is amazing. You see it in response to something ordered, like a jingle, and you see that it is a desire to find form in experience. All experience being personal and all important experience touching us deep, from the start this desire involves affairs vital to our existence.

To see the matter socially we have but to observe the ballads, the crowds at the theatre or the movies, the myriad juke boxes and dance floors, the millions of radios. Are more children curious than eager for order superimposed upon experience? You would have to ask Dr. Gallup. My observation is that the young, academically slow-minded and academically speedy, can learn to read poetry and understand it and write poetry, some of it meritorious, and that the reason why few do this is that as a nation and as professors we do not think the matter important. So much for the view that the humane study in General Education must be confined to a description of societies because this is what the young can be made curious about.

Consider now the centre of the matter. In the reports and discussions of the humanities conference held at Princeton to celebrate the bicentennial, the two best statements which I have seen were made by a Frenchman and a Mexican. M. Maritain flew to America to say that among the chiefly significant elements in the humanistic tradition are the invincibility of the inner world and the superiority of delightfulness over usefulness, or the immanence of contemplation over transitory action. Senor O'Gorman, the historian, came from the National University of Mexico to say that he understood pursuit of the humanities to entail a passionate interest in immersing oneself in the knowledge of man. With due respect for our intellectual and other accomplishments, Professor O'Gorman found little of this; in its stead he observed that "all the discussion sooner or later revealed an ultimate concern with problems of a practical nature."

His analysis of our best thought and scholarship merits reflection. He had hoped that scholars in the humanities would be willing to consider the debated question of the historicity of man but found them involved in "academic and methodological problems in the teaching of history, implicitly considered as a discipline in the formation of the civic spirit." He observed that our concern for man has to do with experimental psychology, but that we appear unaware "that such a knowledge is only a representation, a mere image of human existence, which instead of achieving a direct and original contact with that existence, simply offers a theoretical description."



Replies to his recently published letter in the *American Scholar* aver that O'Gorman is unfair in his report of the conference at Princeton, and this may be true. Whether or not he has been unfair to the conference, he has certainly been fair to much profession of the humanities in these days. I regret that he described our shortcomings as a lack of metaphysics and made the accusation in the name of Heidegger, since his criticism would with more point refer to the absence of profound critical thinking in the American pursuit of the humanities. This lack would, in the last analysis, fall under the heading of ethics. I believe Professor Jaeger was present at Princeton, and his work on *Paideia* well represents the critical ethical thinking for which, sad to say, the American study of the humanities is not famous.

A long essay or volume would be required to prove by critical examination of history, letters and ethics that the idea that the humanities are the culture of the past is wrong and the view implied by the two scholars quoted is correct. The contrast and its implications must be evident to all. Either inner action is more important than temporary outer action or it is not; if it is more important, it is clearly the concern of the humanities. Either the understanding of ourselves is a constant and lively and ever-renewed obligation of reasonable men or it is not. If it is our obligation, the humanist is something far different from a transmitter of the past, and the subject of his studies is something far subtler and more profound than societies; it is nothing less than a human being.

In a few words, what *are* the humanities? They are better represented by Leonardo sketching the faces of the condemned in the executioner's car than by Ficino editing Plato. They are the critical discovery of our own nature by use of the most reliable evidence and the most accurate ways available to treat it. The evidence is both direct, in a man's own life, and recorded, the record being important not at all because of its age (its age is incidental, and knowledge of its ages is of value only to illuminate its meaning) but because it is first class, that is, nearest to what we think is the truth, clearest, most accurate. All the best records are poetry. They may lack rhyme, meter, or external form; people are more comfortable when you call them literature; but in the broad sense of the thing *made* they are poetry. The raw experience of our lives related to them is best understood in the terms of poetry—that is, by superimposing upon experience an order and a form, not necessarily an old form, perhaps an altogether new one, but a form.

The primacy of this treatment of human experience was flatly stated by Aristotle. When one mentions Aristotle in these days, he is accused of being esoteric; but let us remember that the *Poetics* to which I here refer was an analysis of public opinion, of the reaction of common people in a crowd at the theatre, then and now the most

popular kind of thinking. Those who have read the essay with care are still inclined to deem it superior in precision to a Hooper rating. "Poetry," said Aristotle, "is something more scientific and serious than history." φιλοδοφώτερον — more scientific or more philosophical or, as sometimes translated, more nearly true. This sentence, illuminated by the Aristotelian idea of the universal and of fiction, gives the key to the nature of the humanities, not, obviously, because Aristotle delivered it, but because the predominating evidence over two millenia, in scores of nations, by millions of theatre-goers and hecatombs of critics and philosophers points to its viability. It implies that the subject of the humanities is man in action—inward as well as outward action—and it states that the peculiarly human way of representing, examining and reflecting upon this action is poetry, or what, using a more general term, we call literature.

These definitions bear upon the theory of general education which is now in process of revising the college course. They point to a misconception of poetry in the broad sense in which the term is here used and following that misconception, to a partial or one-sided account of the uses of the mind implicit in much current curricular revision.

First, the ignorance of what poetry is. This cannot be dispelled by describing poems. Poems should be spoken, written, and ruminated upon. To teach many people poetry would be to provide what Professor O'Gorman calls a direct, original and authentic knowledge of man instead of a representative, descriptive and imaginary one. To teach many people poetry, however, requires first of all schooling in imagination in order to improve the skill in sensing what is valid and tends toward truth and what is sentimental or fantastic. It requires also the highest type of accuracy, spiritual accuracy. It requires time and a special kind of learning, for what is being learnt is a way to think which is different from the way to think in other studies.

What really happens is that in poetry one refines and elaborates a natural and naïve way to think; in other sorts of learning this naturalness naïveté, for good reasons, are discredited. Gertrude Stein may have said some silly things, but now and then, a trenchant one, as when she remarked that in early childhood the image and the object are coincident, but imperceptibly as we grow older the object steals away from behind the image more and more, leaving us in an adult world composed almost entirely of images. Dialectic run riot creates a world of images divorced from their objects.

To train the imagination and learn by it to continue to see objects instead of images and to prize objects above images—that is the task of the teacher of the humanities. The higher learning by and large is the Lady of Shalott. Poetry alone makes it possible to look out the window as well as into the mirror. There is but one thing

more red-blooded than poetry and that is life itself. Cultural history is the reflection of poetry, little more than images. If experience is to be described by its circumstances, economic, political, historical, geographical, then experience itself will never be understood. Description of circumstances is the enemy of any truly humane understanding unless it is kept, as John Livingston Lowes said of the footnotes to *The Road to Xanadu*, "severely kennelled in the rear." Cultural history is stage directions and belongs behind the scenes. Even backstage it must be kept in its place. When John Barrymore, for example, undertook Hamlet, he eschewed all prefaces, critical commentary and footnotes, isolating himself in the woods for two years with nothing but the bare lines of the poem. He was determined that every inflection should be controlled by the meaning of the whole play, and the result was a production of Hamlet which by its penetration and new discovery of humor in the lines was the marvel even of the "authorities." To teach poetry with honor, the intellectual process must be held in honor, side by side with the historical and dialectical processes, which, when they become overweening, dishonor poetry and discredit it.

A good practical way to train the imagination to see objects instead of images is to translate some prose or verse out of Greek or Latin into English, or the reverse, for to make a fair representation of the ideas in another language requires both imagination, and in the process, a disciplining, for the imagination is applied, if the foreign literature is a good one, to the subtlest and most elusive and most important ideas of mankind. To write a sonnet in English; to write a story and make it a story and make it come off; to produce a play or act a complex part: these are exercises both in the development of imagination and the discipline of it. Most of all to read poetry and understand it—perhaps to prove your understanding by the perfect and only inflection in reading the lines aloud; that is an accomplishment.

How does this training begin? It starts small and remains at its highest reaches dependent upon understanding the elements: metaphor, over-tone, innuendo, lyric, and story. These are not mere techniques of analysis. When I say understanding metaphor I do not mean the tagging of tropes, learning the difference between the definitions of metaphor and simile, and the Virgilian simile. I mean the way the poet thinks and the way, if he is to be understood, the reader must think. That is, to *think* with metaphor, lyric, and story.

Metaphor is as essential to the understanding of poetry as interpolation to trigonometry. Without a lively and active knowledge of metaphor in use, you could no more read *The Eve of St. Agnes* or *Antigone and the Tyrant* than you could expect, without algebra, to deal with the quantum theory. Let us name over, textbook fashion, some of the departments of using metaphor: it carries you toward precision



in both the visible and invisible world; each metaphor has its own limitations; if carried one step beyond its own proper use a metaphor turns away from accuracy and quickly offends you by its untruth (consider the dead idea of "perspective" in the committee opinion about culture); to use Robert Frost's phrase, there is "metaphor of the whole" and "metaphor of the part." While dying Thomas Hardy had read to him Walter de la Mare's poem, *The Listeners*, which contains the lines

Tell them I came and no one answered  
That I kept my word, he said.

Undoubtedly the reason Hardy asked for the poem is its metaphor of the whole.

Metaphor of the part without metaphor of the whole produces bright sayings, epigrams and witty conversation. Metaphor of the whole without metaphor of the part produces dead raw argument, the mere prose thinking of logical metaphysicians. Metaphor of the part when reiterated becomes fixed in symbols (cherubim and the dove); some of it has further hardened into language (*spiritus*, spirit). In a poem metaphor of the part must be wild, free and surprising, and to order the amazing revelations into a poem all metaphor of the part must serve the metaphor of the whole. Some consider metaphors mere "beauties," the cloves to the ham. They are, of course, the substance of poetry, as of thought.

Metaphor may be physical on both sides, as when you say the cook's face was as red as the lid of the stove. Or it may go from material to immaterial, as when you say, "He wounds with his shield." The unmentioned sword is there, the sword with which most men deliver wounds. But to speak of this is to become, as Mr. Frost says, "too thorough." Those five words of the metaphor itself contain a full novel. Walter Pater made a metaphor so elaborate that one would think it could not stay in our consciousness to assist thought—"to burn always with that hard gem-like flame," but in spite of its complexity this idea remains among the working tools of our minds.

Lyric also is a way of thinking—for the poet and for the reader. It is one large manifestation of celebration, the mode of any art. Most things seen or thought about have a very slight third dimension if any depth at all. In the arts the third dimension is so real that the object stands surrounded by air and light, separated from the world behind and beneath, all by itself and undeniably a thing. It is placed in the world, but for the moment isolated and vivid to the eye, as vivid as the figure in a Renaissance portrait, bright, dark, warm and present, cutting with its contour the pale blue shapes of the landscape background. It has light and weight and depth, like a loaf by Vermeer. We say it sings. This is its celebration; something

glorifies it. If it is a snake, it is more snake—"tumbling in twenty coils"; if a drunkard, more surely drunk—"This is my right hand, and this is my left"; a rascal, Iago; the lovesick, "If music be the food of love, play on"; a lover.

She bids you on the wanton rushes lay you down  
And she will sing the song that pleases you.

Eric Bentley recently remarked that a potato by Cezanne would be superior to a crucifixion by Holman Hunt. The reason is that Cezanne was the better celebrant. By glorifying the object in light he made it more truly itself. The counterpart of this quality in poetry is lyric. Why, for example, is the ugly story of Medea a poem when Euripides tells it and little more than a shrill scream when Robinson Jeffers tries his hand? Not because Euripides prettifies it, oh no. But because in the Euripides play there is lyric and in the Jeffers, none. Chaucer has a reputation for telling stories; half of it rests on the fact that he is a lyricist.

To celebrate an idea is not to gild it; on the contrary, it is to see it as in itself it really is. Well celebrated, the cock stands up in the barnyard, surrounded by the sun, and when he crows

In all the land of crowyng nas his peer:  
His voys was murier than the murie orgon.

In short, he is more truly cock. Shakespeare, a master of the metaphor of the part as well as of metaphor of the whole, makes unendurable pain more bearable by lyric—

We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage.

By becoming endurable, the tragedy deepens; the pain has not blacked you out in a faint; you are still conscious, and there before you is the terrible destruction of the unfilial and unimaginative mind. The awful fact is the longer and more accurately regarded.

Celebration is a method of holding under the eye for a span something eminently worth notice. As it proceeds, for example, in the songs of Ophelia, not only the eye but our whole inward apprehension observes, and what we see is many times greater than what can be conveyed by prose. In artificial light a painting of Renoir has a few strong colors and that is all; by daylight, a hundred unsuspected ones. It is so when by means of celebration we see a thing or a person or an idea.

Like familiarity with lyric, familiarity with story is acquired by use, not by precept. These lessons take long to learn. History proves that all kinds of people learn them: fishermen, bank presidents, the C man, the disciplinary case, the Phi Beta Kappa. To know a story and why it is a story and why it cannot remain the same and be trans-

lated into exposition and that the rarest and mightiest possessions of the human spirit can be discovered only by means of story and by no other process of thinking; to know all this and to have it yours is to have much. The beginnings of this knowledge are available, like general education, to every man, and to each according to his capacity to take and use.

For most American youth Greek and Latin are gone and have been lamented. In the search for something to take their place, we should remember the real usefulness of those honorable studies. They trained the imagination. This was possible even in the old harsh grammatical and translating disciplines for four reasons: because the literature to be read was peculiarly refined and strong, because the languages were two of the best, because the pause necessary to deal with phrases in a strange tongue gave time for the meaning of the phrases to work upon the student, and because the difficult task of conveying as nearly as possible in our own language the subtle intent of the ancient sentences required extensive trial of little-used resources of our own tongue. If and when something is found effectively to take the place of the old schoolboy Greek and Latin, it will be something which also requires long meditation upon words and their elaborate meanings and upon the affairs of the human heart which produce wars, marriages and harvest festivals. No thoughtful boy is the same after beginning to master in the few years of the end of adolescence the meaning of *hybris*, *nemesis* and *areté*. It may be that by reading and writing poetry and dwelling upon the voluminous significance of the words with which we carry on privately the soul's own conversation with herself, that is, American English words, young people will come equally far by beginning to master the meaning of such loaded words as *lust-in-action*, *charity*, *felicity*.

These matters may sound small, not to say trivial, in the presence of discussion by the President's Commission of The Bomb and the United Nations and their opinion that the guiding principle of general education for all youth should be the discovery and dissemination of new social techniques. They are small but not trivial. For example, a boy back from the Burma Road tussled and struggled with the ballads, finding no connection between those old wars and war as he had seen it. The class read *The Ode to Melancholy*, and on this he spent fearful travail. Asked what the poem said, he replied after literally hours of thought: "Don't be downhearted!" Sent back to try again, he reported that the poem means, "Always be downhearted!" So he labored for a fruitless year and a half. One day he came to say he had heard on the radio "The Twelve Days of Christmas." "What a poem! That was wonderful! I had no idea there was anything like that!" And so he is started in a new mode of apprehension. This is small, but I know that when he falls in love his image of the girl he loves will not be determined altogether by the golden

and empty-faced beauties of Hollywood, but what he and his girl possess together will be elaborated by at least this old and delicate poem—at least by this, for when one begins to hear poetry the first poem is but a beginning. These are only two people in a populous nation, but multiply their story and see the effect on the quality of American life. Men and women who understand poetry should be concerned with its long exacting mastery by the young. That in the first place.

With a firmer grasp of what poetry in its broad sense is and how to think with it, the nature of the education necessary for all men becomes clarified. The chief problem posed by the new humanities courses, which are cultural history and mostly in translation—English, is whether or not they can exert a wholesome influence toward unifying undergraduate studies without violating the fundamental variety of the ways in which the mind copes with the essential fields of experience. Mathematics and dialectic are two closely allied habits of the mind, and they are adequate for the study of physical nature and for the analysis of fact and opinion about men in groups called social science. They are not the best ways to think about man. The mode of humanistic study is distinct from them. Rhetoric does not describe it, since that ancient word is tainted by its origin in the arts of persuasion. Grammar and logic are involved, and something very much more: in clumsy fashion the mode may be described by the phrase poetic thinking. To say that cultural history is the core of general education is to ignore this fundamental truth. Literature as literature is vital to the intellectual life of even the least intellectual.

The beginner in the short-story course puts into the mouth of his hero coming out of a swoon the words, "Where am I?" But the instructor red-pencils this. Almost anything else is allowed: "Who hit me?" or "Edythe!" or "Water!" Modern man is said to have been clopped on the head, and the authors of the dialogue seek words to put into his mouth as he comes back to daylight. For all our cleverness, we who represent the higher learning have managed to think up nothing more original for his next speech than "Where am I?"

I refer to the new general education courses and their lust for location. They assume that what men need most is to learn where they are, and they try to give bearings on the past. As one reads more closely the reports of committees and prefaces to new courses one learns that the real subject of study is not man but societies—how this society emerged from some other and how it compares with a third. I have quoted some of the ablest university leaders to this effect. The report of the President's Commission on Higher Education released last December says the same thing.

I am willing to grant that it is usually a good thing to know your way about, but let us not forget the many brilliant and able minds of our acquaintance who get lost in the streets, and for whom

ignorance of the compass is nothing worse than an amusing joke. Let us remember also how downright destructive map-mindedness can be. I once watched a group of tourists "do" the Louvre, camera on chest, guide-book open in hand. They trooped into a room containing a famous small head by Lotto, finding their way by their feet as they read the compass card in Baedeker. By some miraculous museum habit their feet stopped before the picture; they finished reading, looked up, and exclaimed, almost in unison, "Lotto!" and left the room.

Location courses are designed to meet the objection that the university has become a multiversity and to give not only unity but integration (medicinal word). The argument runs that while a century and a half ago theology, often dispensed in lectures by the president of the college, gave centrality to studies, such supernatural assistance is no longer available (perhaps because the presidents are no longer supermen) and history, including the history of ideas, must make whatever sense can be made of the fascinating welter of modern knowledge.

Western Civilization; the Humanities: as one reads the description of these courses he observes a kind of *mappa mundi*, and it is by no accident that in this *nouvel moyen age* we have turned to making maps. In austere rationalism, barely warmed by imagination, and lacking the courage and abandon which goes with humor, we have earnestly studied, as did our cousins, the scholastic thinkers, the connectives of knowledge. Academic people like to regard the proposals of St. John's College and the University of Chicago as mediaeval oddities in the twentieth century. Some of the efforts to implement the proposals are certainly unusual, but the intellectual reaction which they represent is fairly general in our lifetime. It is a force in most committee thinking about the higher learning, the reaction from disorder to system.

The fact that "Where am I?" is trite means that really we think something like it, though rarely in those stage-worn words. One of our concerns is, in truth, location, and the trouble with locating ourselves by means of *mappa mundi* or chronology or philosophical system is that no one of these compass cards nor all taken together have the important dimensions. And by studying hard the facts of history or the movements of society or the systems of philosophy, we may in effect abuse our sense of where we are within ourselves and in relation to what in truth confronts us. All that explicit location of these various studies—history, philosophy, politics—is surely useful. But it becomes significant to the individual only if simultaneously he has mastered other ways to think.

*Know thyself.* The ancient phrase has probably been made to mean literally everything which anybody ever thought important. Someone in a famous university once publicly said he thought it



meant: Know your cells and organs; for he emblazoned the slogan at the Chicago Century of Progress Exposition over formaldehyde exhibits of the human embryo and foetus in successive stages. For the ancients, γνῶθι σεαυτόν referred, among other things, to location. *Know Thyself* meant "Know where you stand." So Critias in the Charmides, speaking of the inscription at the temple of Delphi, said, "That word, if I am not mistaken, is put there as a word of salutation which the god addresses to those who enter the temple; as much as to say that the ordinary salutation of 'Hail!' is not right, and that the exhortation 'Be Temperate!' would be a far better way of saluting one another. The notion of him who dedicated the inscription was, as I believe, that the god speaks to those who enter his temple, not as men speak; but when a worshipper enters, the first word which he hears is 'Be temperate!' This, however, like a prophet he expresses in a sort of riddle, for 'Know Thyself!' and 'Be Temperate!' are the same . . ."

Mayor Harrison of Chicago said during the 1893 World's Fair: Chicago can achieve whatever it purposes, and it has fixed its purpose upon a star. Let us imagine, in the absence of proof, that this mayor took himself seriously. Then location would have been important for him; he might have avoided talking like a fool by knowing where as men we all stand. Location in these terms involves dimensions difficult to grasp, the important dimensions dealt with by poetry. It is the knowledge acquired at fearful cost by the protagonists in tragedy. "This knowledge," says Professor Bowra in speaking of Sophoclean tragedy, "is about themselves, but primarily about themselves in relation to the gods." "For Sophocles," he goes on, "this is the essential and fundamental knowledge. A man does not know himself or his place until he knows how he stands with the gods."

All this sounds biggity, not to say ultimate. I introduce it because the exponents of general education quite properly talk of ultimates, proposing that the education to be made available to every man and to each according to his capacity should be determined by the ultimate idea of what learning is. This should be the effort to understand man by thinking in the peculiarly human way, that is, in poetry. Thinking thus, one usually is occupied with less than the final high seriousness of the mighty ideas of tragedy. Comedy also, and ballads and stories and lyrics place you. They place you in the frieze, the peopled frieze that goes around the Parthenon and the procession which goes around the strange mysterious earth. Many an American lacks just this sense of location, and among them, many, who like Richard Cory, are regarded as successful. Why is it that to many of them, as to him, the active and acquisitive life for which we are famous is ashes in the mouth? It proves an illusion, a mere image. Why, as a people, do we lack the disciplined imagination necessary to recognize it for what it is, an image divorced from its object? Such

considerations as these should be introduced into the debates about the purpose of general education.

In sum, the current notions of the nature of the humanities and of the nature of general education could be clarified by a first-hand sense of what poetry is and this in turn would lead to redressing the imbalance in the curricular discussions.

Clearly, what I speak of is of vast importance to the world. This, rather than the mere improvement of social science and technology, should concern the American supporters of UNESCO. Why should it be that our rich and powerful and generous nation, so ambitious in the spirit of toleration and earnestly concerned to safeguard tolerance in social and political matters, should be regarded by many of the finest minds abroad as fundamentally intolerant of any but the active and successful and humanitarian American way of life? Why, but because our splendid imagination, which is the marvel of the century in industry and war, is confined largely to mechanical things and because as an intellectual force in the world we lack precisely what a rich and intimate use of poetry requires: that is, direct perception both of the realities of existence and of the numerous conjectures worthy the allegiance of a brave man concerning its ends.

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